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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications of the accountability concept for provincial or State authorities. Accountability is defined as a concomitant of an agreement between two parties. The author suggests that, in education, agreements between parties have lacked preciseness and clarity, making it extremely difficult to assess performance and to assign responsibility in terms of some contractual obligation. Because in both Canada and in the United States the constitution assigns responsibility for education to the provincial and State governments, the author believes that accountability should begin at these levels. (Author)

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ACCOUNTABILITY: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PROVINCIAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS

A paper presented to the

Northwest Association of Secondary & Higher Schools

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by

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ACCOUNTABILITY: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PROVINCIAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS

The assignment for this examination of the concept of accountability is to focus upon its implications for provincial or state level authorities. For this purpose accountability is defined as a concomitant of an agreement between two parties, a client and a supplier. The agreement either assumes or explicitly stipulates that one, the supplier, will provide a service or 'good' to the other, his client, and that upon receipt of the service or good the client will reward the supplier. As a concomitant of the agreement both the supplier and the client become accountable, they assume responsibility to perform in a certain way, and not only in the rather general terms of a financial audit (records have been maintained according to the generally accepted rules of accounting). The concomitant, accounting, occurs if either or both parties at various stages or when the service has been provided, the good has been delivered, or a period of time has elapsed, evaluate to determine how effective the service has been or whether the good meets specifications, as a basis for deciding on further action.

Within the framework which has evolved for the provision of educational service there are various authorities which, and individuals who have been assigned and have accepted responsibility. Their involvement varies in part depending upon level, depending on the relationship of a group or an individual to that level, and upon many other factors.

To illustrate, in both Canada and the United States, the responsibility for education has been assigned to the provincial or state govern-

ment level. This level has, on behalf of its constituents, identified the general objectives which it considers important and has also defined the sources from which support is to be obtained in order that required resources will be available to a delivery system. It has, in some cases, directly administered institutions and programs of service; in some, delegated responsibility to another public body created or defined by the provincial or state authority (school board, board of trustees or governors); and, in some, licensed a private authority to be involved in providing service, sometimes with public support. It has developed a procedure for monitoring, evaluating, and intervening in the affairs of authorities subordinate to it.

If this analysis is correct, then ultimate responsibility for quality in education rests with the provincial or state authority.

From time to time, and especially recently, federal governments have become directly or indirectly involved in this sector which is supposed to be the prerogative of the provincial or state government. The involvement has resulted sometimes from unilateral federal initiative for reasons important to it, sometimes from joint consideration by the two levels, sometimes from pressure applied from other sources on one or both governmental levels, and sometimes from requests by the province or state to the federal government. Regardless of the source of this initiative, with involvement the federal government assumes responsibility and becomes accountable for its actions. However, since the province or state is the governmental level which assumes final responsibility for education within the boundaries of its jurisdiction, it also must assume responsibility for the consequences of federal involvement.

Provincial and state authorities always have accepted the responsibilities assigned to them and assumed by them. They have done this in a variety of ways depending on their role in an agreement and upon the authority which requested an accounting.

At the post-secondary level the provincial or state authority has provided for the creation of institutions which are intended to provide service to full-time students and to other members of the society. Each institution has initiated a combination of services requiring the employment of professional and other staff. Students and the public have taken advantage of the services offered.

While this may appear to be a simple and straightforward arrangement in terms of agreement between parties, it must be noted that there are numerous parties, and consequently, agreements involved.

The provincial or state (central) authority agrees to delegate to a board (local) the responsibility for directly governing an institution. In return, the central authority usually agrees to provide funds to support the local operation. In this agreement, who is responsible or accountable for what? In most cases the bulk of the relative responsibilities are quite clear. The responsibility for some is currently being negotiated. Some have yet to be identified.

The board in turn enters into an agreement with individuals (staff members) to provide service. In this case the board offers remuneration and other rewards and the employee agrees to provide service. In both Canada and the United States the employer and employee negotiate to determine both the extent and type of service to be provided and the reward which is to be granted. However, the methods to be used in monitoring and assessing the

quality of service provided are not clear in most negotiated agreements. Neither is the literature on methods of assessment clear about what is most appropriate. What is to be done when criticism is heard regarding the quality of service and its relation to rewards granted? And what are the rights and responsibilities of the central authority when it hears criticisms about operation at the local level? If the locus of responsibility or accountability is to be clearly identified, then agreements must be made more specific regarding all these matters.

Considering next the student and others, the nature of an agreement is going to vary depending in part on whether they are to be considered clients of or participants in the enterprise. If they are clients, as recipients of service presumably they could and should enter an agreement with the institution. But should this be an agreement with the board or with staff of the board? If students are participants, then probably their relationship will be different. Again what the nature and degree of their involvement in establishing an agreement, and the nature of a desirable agreement is not clear. Once again, if the interest of the central authority is to be identified and protected, its interest must be considered in the development of the agreement.

There has always been some criticism of practices of the educational system and of its parts, and always some of this has been directed toward the government and toward agencies or institutions created by it, and the remaining criticism has usually been directed toward identifiable groups and individuals within the institutions, and the programs which constitute the system. In part, because the educational enterprise is requiring an ever increasing supply of resources both absolute and relative

to some measure of total resources (G.N.P., G.P/S.P.), because in other sectors of public and private business new techniques for management have and are being developed, and because of complaints heard from students, staff, parents, and employees, provincial and state governments are receiving criticisms and directions from many sources internal and external to the educational system regarding its operation. These proposals usually call for an improvement in quality and in efficiency at all levels. They sometimes imply that educators have, in the past, conducted their operation in isolation from external or internal direction or guidance which could have been provided by the so-called efficient, knowledgeable, realistic businessmen. When this is implied or stated, the critics ignore the fact that legislators, members of boards of governors and of trustees, have in the majority been businessmen and professionals from fields other than education.

In the recent past the provincial and state governments have responded to criticisms and demands in a variety of ways. The response most frequently has involved a re-examination of organizational structures, of levels of resource support provided, and concern with perceived problems in the operation of systems and institutions. At the central level, governments have responded by establishing an authority which can attempt to identify and solve problems. This agency frequently has been a new department of government or a coordinating agency of some kind. In either case this authority is intended to be responsible or accountable to government. In the case of the coordinating agency, it is usually intermediary between the government and operating institutions and therefore has responsibility of accountability also to institutions.

While this is a very tenuous position, this authority does deal with government, system, and institutional interests, and it can be asked to account for what is going on. (Unfortunately, some of these agencies were established after adjectives such as "seige" and "crisis" were being applied to the operations of institutions and systems. Consequently, unless these authorities solve perceived problems quickly, they may be dissolved before they have a chance to achieve their potential).

The re-examination of levels of resource provision by the central authority has resulted in calls for increased efficiencies in order that rates of increases in unit costs may be curtailed, reduced, or converted to negative indicies. In addition, central authorities have initiated budgetary and planning procedures at the system level and have encouraged institutions to do likewise. In some cases legislation has been introduced to increase the authority of the central agency relative to institutions and other legislation to ensure that certain aspects of institutional operation are fixed or changed to increase productivity. An example of this latter change is legislation to identify minimum staff load in terms of hours of instruction time per week by faculty in institutions.

In response to criticisms about relevance of programs and institution-client relationships, the central authority has either initiated or supported the calls for reviews and assessments of the validity of current programs in line with criteria such as those proposed by the Carnegie Commission, the calls for humanization of the educational process, and the proposals that education be viewed as a lifelong process rather than as a preparation for life.

Finally, central authorities have recognized the need for increased

emphasis upon developmental rather than reactive planning. Most authorities have encouraged this within existing structures and many have established new agencies whose prime function is intended to be developmental planning.

From the viewpoint of the provincial or state authority, therefore, the concept of accountability if defined as indicated at the outset of this paper is quite acceptable. Not only is it acceptable, but it has always been a concomitant of the agreements which have been made between various authorities and individuals involved in the educational enterprise. It must be admitted, however, that governments in their relations with their constituents have not identified as clearly as may be possible or desirable the details of their respective obligations. Neither has government identified very specifically what it expects of agencies which it creates, authorizes, or licenses. Similarly, these agencies have not precisely defined the obligations they expect and that they incur when they establish contracts with their employees. And finally, institutions and their employees do not clearly identify the obligations they have to clients nor the obligations which must be undertaken by clients.

There has been instead of a contract which precisely describes every detail, a contract which states terms in a rather general way. Along with this general statement has been an attitude based upon mutual understanding and trust. Those expected to provide legitimation and resources have been trusted to do so, while those expected to provide service have also been trusted. This state has been accompanied by a considerable degree of ambiguity and polarization in terms of contract, obligations, expectations, and performance assessment. The ambiguity currently results

from the nature of our contracts and the deficiencies in our ability to make accurate assessments. Under these conditions it seems inevitable that there will be polarization between those who provide service and those who provide rewards, and between those who provide and those who receive service.

If we are to move toward the inclusion of greater precision in the contracts which are made, as appears to be the demand of those who are calling for increased emphasis upon accountability, it seems reasonable that we clarify the obligations to all parties involved in contracts. Groups within society must define more clearly what they expect, and must be aware of the resources which will have to be provided. Governments and other authorities which are parties to a contract must assume similar responsibilities.

With greater precision in contracts and procedures there will be some gains, but there may also be some losses. These must be weighed against the potential gains to determine whether certain aspects of the process are worthy of implementation.

Finally, if the concept of accountability and the procedures which are required to implement it are considered only as a management technique which demands no obligations from management, whatever the level, it is unfair, and is likely doomed to fail in achieving the goals for which the application of the concept is intended.